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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2608
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2230
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7083
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6279
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1518
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0467
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000274

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ODIP KDEM AG
SUBJECT: MFA OFFICIAL CALLS GOVERNMENT ATTACKS ON EMBASSY
"INFORMAL"

REF: A. ALGIERS 248
B. ALGIERS 249

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: There was more media clamor on March 5 about the Algerian government accusations that the U.S. Embassy and the Ambassador of "interference" in internal Algerian affairs (ref A). Government spokesman Boukerzaza told the press March 4 that there was no diplomatic crisis with the Embassy, but Prime Minister Belkhadem wanted to remind foreign embassies of diplomatic conventions. We have received no official complaint of any kind. The Ambassador on March 5 asked Fatiha Selmane, MFA Director General for the Americas (Assistant Secretary equivalent), for an official explanation of the Prime Minister's March 2 use of the word "interference". Selmane speculated that Belkhadem and Foreign Minister Medelci were only speaking informally, and that the Algerian press could not be trusted for accuracy. Pointing also to remarks from Belkhadem and Boukerzaza that political parties and civil society representatives should stop meeting foreign embassies, Ambassador asked if the Algerian government really had changed its policy and now considered such meetings to be improper. The Ambassador underscored that in all our meetings we have stressed that the issue of constitutional change to allow a third term for President Bouteflika is for Algerians to decide. We hope the GoA will stop making statements in the press about our meetings and let the issue fade out of the media limelight. In private conversations with Algerian officials, we need to underline that Algeria is a relatively open society and the government should not try to make it less so. END SUMMARY.

MFA: ATTACKS "INFORMAL ECHOES" OF POPULAR PROTEST

12. (C) Ambassador, DCM and PolEcon Chief called on the MFA on March 5 to ask for an explanation of the Prime Minister's March 2 accusation that the embassy's meetings with political parties and civil society organizations were interference in Algerian internal affairs. Selmane, who was accompanied by MFA Deputy Director for North America Rachid Ouali, told us that she had no instructions on the matter, but she believed the prime minister and foreign minister had been speaking "informally" to the press. They were, she speculated, merely relaying the "echoes of protest" from political parties and civil society organizations that had been building over time.

The Ambassador asked Selmane for official confirmation that Belkhadem and the rest of the government were asking

political parties and civil society organizations not to meet with foreign embassies. Selmane did not know, but promised to pass the question to higher levels. She also blamed the Algerian press for exaggerating and "looking for scoops."

¶3. (C) Ambassador agreed that the Algerian independent press makes plenty of mistakes. He also noted that the Embassy had on March 3 issued a communique trying to reduce the media temperature. By contrast, the Algerian government had made little effort and appeared comfortable letting the public believe erroneous press interpretations. The Ambassador underlined if the GoA had a case, we would like to hear it, since we have been careful not to speak for or against the constitutional amendments and third presidential term issues. If meetings themselves with private Algerians are interpreted as an interference then we wish to understand this change in Algerian policy.

MFA AND COMMUNICATION

¶4. (C) Selmane stressed the importance of communication between the Embassy and MFA as essential to avoid misunderstandings, a point she said Medelci had made last week to NEA Assistant Secretary C. David Welch (ref B). Ambassador clarified that what A/S Welch had actually raised was the onus of passing all meeting requests through the MFA's Protocol office, which retards action and the growth of bilateral relations. He cited the example of a February 5 diplomatic note requesting a meeting with hydrocarbon parastatal Sonatrach to address urgent Embassy security issues. To date, the meeting has not happened, and Ambassador pointed out that we could easily approach the

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relevant Sonatrach officials directly but MFA Director of Protocol Abdelkader Mesdoua did not allow him to do so.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) The local press remains seized with the subject of foreign embassies' meetings with political parties and civil society organizations, but the MFA has delivered no complaint of any kind. One well-connected veteran MFA ambassador told Ambassador privately late March 5 that the constitutional amendment is still divisive within the Algerian political elite. Those in favor of the amendment seek President Bouteflika's favor by attacking alleged American interference. The newspapers are happy to run stories to sell more copy. This MFA veteran cautioned that these Bouteflika sycophants would challenge the loyalty of any GoA official who tried to walk back the allegations of American interference. This source recommended that both sides stop talking about the issue in the media and let the subject fade away from the press - a point he said he would make in his own meetings with top GoA officials. If the meetings issue is indeed a wedge, political opportunists like the Prime Minister may keep raising it. We hope the issue fades from the media, and we will structure our media approach with that goal. A more problematic reality, however, is that officials within the Algerian government are telling their citizens that discussions with foreign embassies are not welcome. It is important in our private conversations with Algerian officials to underline that Algeria for twenty years has been a relatively open society and the Government should not try to make it less so.

FORD